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AUTHOR Anderson, Karen M.
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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to examine the usefulness of importance ratings in predicting the relationship between: (1) overall self-esteem and more specific subscale scores of self-esteem; and (2) domain-specific self-esteem scores and domain-specific self-concept scores. Subjects were 70 children attending third, fourth, and fifth grades of a public elementary school in San Jose, California. Self-report measures employed were Marsh's Self-Description Questionnaire and a modified version of Harter's Self-Perception Profile. For each of Harter's original 30 domain-specific items, excluding the global self-worth items, an importance item was also written and included directly after the original item. Findings indicated that use of importance ratings to weight domain-specific self-esteem scores did not result in a stronger relationship to global self-esteem. Third graders seemed to be less stable than fourth and fifth graders in self-perceptions and self-esteem. Fifth graders, in contrast, seemed to have both more accurate self-perceptions and a greater grasp of the importance of scholastic achievement as it relates to overall self-esteem. (RH)

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The Usefulness of Importance Ratings in Predicting the Relationship between Self-Esteem and Self-Concept Scores

Karen M. Anderson

Santa Clara University

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I would like to thank the teachers, staff, and students at Booksin School in San Jose, CA for their cooperation with this project (and in particular, Dr. Doris Otillar). I would also like to thank Brooke Russo for her help with the data collection and scoring. Please address all correspondence to Dr. Karen Anderson, Dept. of Psychology, Santa Clara University, Santa Clara CA 95053.

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THE USEFULNESS OF IMPORTANCE RATINGS IN PREDICTING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SELF-ESTEEM AND SELF-CONCEPT SCORES

Traditionally, when researchers talk about the self-concept, a distinction is made between two different aspects of the self. First is self-esteem, which is typically viewed as the affective part of the self. Second, there is the self-concept itself, which is more content-oriented. While not all researchers would agree to this division, it seems clear that some sort of distinction between substantive content areas and affective reactions regarding those specific content areas should be made.

The study of these affective reactions, or self-esteem itself, is sometimes viewed as problematic. One long-running debate in this area has to do with the issue of defining and measuring self-esteem. Is self-esteem a global, overarching feeling about the self, as suggested by such venerable self-esteem theorists as Coopersmith and Rosenberg? Or is self-esteem best viewed as a set of distinct, domain-specific feelings that correspond to specific aspects of the self-concept? Finally, is there necessarily a relationship between more specific aspects of self-esteem, and a more global form of self-esteem? Most researchers assume that one's domain-specific self-esteem scores should predict one's feelings of global self-esteem.

One final issue that has haunted the study of self-esteem is the question of measurement. Those researchers using standard self-esteem questionnaires tacitly assume that they are measuring aspects of self-esteem that are relevant and important to each individual child. This

may or may not, however, be the case. As we know, what is important to one child may not be at all relevant for another.

One technique for dealing with the issue of such individual differences would be to allow the child to assign his or her own importance ratings to the specific self-esteem domains being assessed. In this way, the child would end up with a more "personalized" set of self-esteem scores.

A few studies have investigated the question of whether including importance ratings adds to the predictive abilities of domain-specific self-esteem scores. Hoge & McCarthy (1984), for example, first tried to answer the question of whether global self-esteem could be predicted from domain-specific dimensions, and secondly, whether weighting the domain-specific dimensions with importance ratings improved their relationship to global self-esteem. After trying a variety of different weighting schemes, Hoge & McCarthy concluded that individual importance ratings did not improve the prediction of global self-esteem. Rather, it was what the authors call "group identity salience" weights (that is, the mean importance rating for grade and gender subgroups), when used to weight the domain-specific dimension scores, that resulted in the strongest relationship to global self-esteem. Thus, while Hoge & McCarthy did not find that weighting specific dimensions with individual importance ratings helped, they did find that using subgroup importance ratings helped. One major drawback to their study, however, was that they used only single items to assess both the specific self-esteem dimensions and the importance ratings, thus making their results difficult to interpret. In other words, subjects were asked to respond only to a single statement

regarding each self-esteem dimension, and a single item regarding the importance of that dimension.

Herbert Marsh, in a 1986 paper, also investigated the question of whether using importance ratings to weight specific dimensions of the self would aid in the prediction of overall self-esteem. To test this hypothesis, he used his own Self-Description Questionnaire, an instrument which in this version was made up of 13 subscales. Twelve of these subscales pertain to substantive content areas relevant to the self, such as Physical Appearance or General Academic Ability, while the final subscale is a General Self scale, which corresponds to overall self-esteem. When giving the Self-Description Questionnaire to large numbers of Australian students, Marsh also added 12 summary statement items to the questionnaire. The students were asked to decide how important each of the 12 subscale dimensions were. Responses to these ratings served as the importance ratings and were used to weight the 12 subscale scores.

Marsh's results, however, again showed that using importance ratings to weight the subscale dimension scores did not, in fact, improve the relationship to overall self-esteem. In contrast to Hoge & McCarthy's findings, using various subgroup means also did not help. Marsh explained his results by suggesting that perhaps relying on a single-item importance rating was, as he put it, a "psychometrically weak" technique. Marsh suggested that perhaps asking subjects to rate the importance of each individual item on the questionnaire, rather than each dimension, would result in improved importance scores.

Finally, Harter (1986) also used importance ratings with her Self-Perception Profile. The Self-Perception Profile measures self

esteem in 5 specific content areas, such as Scholastic Competence and Social Acceptance, plus a Global Self-Worth subscale. Harter operationalized importance ratings by adding five items that were designed to specifically assess the importance of each of the five separate subscale domains. However, it is unclear from her results as to whether the importance ratings did improve the prediction of global self-esteem, because she never directly tested that particular hypothesis. Rather, Harter was looking at the discrepancies between the importance ratings and the subscale scores, in order to see how these discrepancy scores relate to global self-esteem.

The purpose of the present paper is to look again at the usefulness of importance ratings in predicting the relationship between overall self-esteem and the more specific subscale scores of self-esteem. A secondary issue will consider the usefulness of importance ratings in predicting the relationship between domain-specific self-esteem scores and domain-specific self-concept scores, as measured by two separate questionnaires.

Method

Subjects in this study were 70 children attending a public elementary school in San Jose, California. The sample was made up of 23 3rd graders, 23 4th graders, and 24 5th graders.

Two self-report instruments were used in the present study. The first was a version of Marsh's Self-Description Questionnaire that is appropriate for this age group. This version of the SDQ is a 76-item questionnaire where students respond to a series of statements on a five-point scale ranging from "false" to "true". This instrument yields 7 separate domain-specific scores, plus again a General Self

scores which serves as an overall self-esteem measure, for a total of 8 separate scores. The other subscale scores are as follows: Relations with Peers; Relations with Parents; Reading Ability; Math Ability; All School Subjects; Athletic Ability; and Physical Appearance.

The second instrument used in the present study was a modified version of Harter's Self-Perception Profile. The original questionnaire is made up of 36 items, each of which the child responds to on a four-point scale. Five separate domain-specific subscale scores are derived from the child's responses: Social Acceptance; Scholastic Competence; Athletic Competence; Physical Appearance; Behavioral Conduct; and Global Self-Worth, which is a general self-esteem measure, for a total of six separate subscale scores.

In the present study, however, Harter's original scale was modified in two ways. First, as suggested by previous studies, five additional items were added to the end of the questionnaire to assess the importance of each of the five domains measured by the questionnaire. Second, a set of multiple-item importance statements were also added to the questionnaire. In other words, for each of Harter's original 30 domain-specific items, excluding the Global Self-Worth items, an importance item was also written and included directly following the original item. Thus, the child made a competence rating for each item, as well as an importance rating, for each of the items pertaining to the 5 domain-specific subscales. The instrument used in the present study, then, was 71 statements long.

Because of the length of the two measures, the children were seen on two separate occasions. Children were tested in small groups

at both testing sessions the questions were read out loud by the interviewer while the children marked the appropriate boxes on their own answer sheets.

From these data, a variety of different kinds of importance ratings can be used. First, there are the multiple-item importance ratings. Second, there are the single-item importance ratings as used in previous studies.

Results

The first set of analyses (see Table 1) are correlations between global self-esteem and domain-specific scores with two different weights. The first row is the simple unweighted subscale score. The second row is the subscale score weighted by the multiple-item importance ratings. The third row is the subscale score weighted by Harter's single-item importance rating. All correlations are presented separately by grade, and the correlations presented are for the Scholastic Competence subscale only, because of time considerations.

In looking at the pattern of correlations in Table 1, the most obvious finding is that using either type of importance rating does not result in a stronger correlation with global self-esteem.

A secondary finding of interest among these correlations are the differences between the three grades. First of all, the correlations for the third grade are much lower than those for the other two grades. In fact, the fact that the correlation drops so dramatically when the weighted variables are considered indicates that the third graders as a group might be significantly less stable than fourth and fifth graders.

Finally, it can also be noted from the correlations in the second and third rows that as predicted, the multiple-item importance ratings result in stronger correlations with global self-esteem than a single-item importance rating. Thus, if importance ratings are to be used, it clearly makes more sense to rely upon a set of importance items rather than a single importance rating.

The second set of correlations (see Table 2) are those between self-concept scores from the SDQ (in this case, the All School Subjects score) with the Scholastic self-esteem score from Harter's scale. Again, two weighted variables were considered, along with the unweighted Scholastic Competence score. Again, note that the first row is the unweighted Scholastic Competence score; the second is the score weighted by the multiple-item importance ratings; and the third row is the score weighted by the single-item importance rating. Again, correlations in Table 2 are broken down by grade level.

In looking at the pattern of correlations in Table 2, it appears that only for the fifth graders is the correlation with the All School Subjects score improved using a weighted version of the Scholastic Competence score. This implies that the fifth graders are much better at estimating their own scholastic abilities; this is reflected in the high correlations between their Scholastic self-esteem and All School Subjects scores. The third graders, in contrast, again appear to be much less stable, given the fact that adding the importance ratings actually results in lower correlations with the All School Subjects score. This finding would appear to be consistent with the previous set of correlations discussed.

Discussion

In conclusion, it appears that in general, using importance ratings to weight domain-specific self-esteem scores does not result in a stronger relationship to global self-esteem. Despite the lack of findings regarding the usefulness of importance ratings, however, some interesting age differences did emerge. First of all, the third graders on the whole seem to be less stable in terms of both self-perceptions and self-esteem. The fifth graders, in contrast, seem to have both more accurate self-perceptions and a greater grasp of the importance of scholastic achievement as it relates to overall self-esteem.

The fact that using importance ratings did not seem to strengthen the correlation with global self-esteem could be interpreted in two different ways. One possible conclusion is that perhaps importance ratings do not help and in fact are not useful. I find this to be a counterintuitive conclusion, however. A second possibility is that perhaps we simply have not found the most appropriate way to operationalize importance ratings. Perhaps future research on the usefulness of importance ratings should focus on more open-ended kinds of data, for example, or perhaps a more in-depth analysis of a smaller number of subjects. Finally, it may be that importance ratings are not useful until a later period of development; data from the present study, in fact, suggest that this may be the case. Clearly, however, the questions regarding the usefulness of importance ratings are questions that deserve future research.

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Table 1

	Global Self-Worth		
	3rd (n=23)	4th (n=23)	5th (n=24)
Scholastic Competence	.518	.839	.735
Multiple-Item Weighted	.410	.756	.671
Single-Item Weighted	.112	.667	.441

Table 2

	All School Subjects Scores		
	3rd (n=23)	4th (n=23)	5th (n=24)
Scholastic Competence	.543	.390	.604
Multiple-Item Weighted	.384	.393	.716
Single-Item Weighted	.199	.354	.724